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The Nuclear Implications of Iran-Pakistan Tensions

Tensions with nuclear-armed Pakistan may influence Iran's calculus regarding its own nuclear program.

By Maysam Behravesht

November 11, 2014

The long-standing tensions between Iran and Pakistan over proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the use of militant proxies for regional power projection, and divergent geopolitical alignments remain one of the oft-neglected strategic factors that may influence Tehran's nuclear calculus in salient ways. Such a consideration carries much greater significance today, when [decade-long negotiations](#) between Iran and P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, U.S., and Germany) over the Iranian atomic venture have reached a very sensitive stage. Once they escalate into a systematic pattern, as suggested by developments over the past years, Tehran-Islamabad tensions will constitute a totally new security front for the Islamic Republic and are thus likely to exert a cynical impact on its nuclear logic.

Iran's relationship with Sunni-majority Pakistan has often been one of restrained fear and loathing, dating back to the spring of 1998. In 1998, following nuclear tests by India, Pakistan conducted a series of atomic tests and thus became Iran's sole neighbor with nuclear weapons capability. In August the same year, the Taliban forces — who had established their “Emirate” in Afghanistan after toppling the Afghan government with the assistance of Islamabad in 1996 — captured the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif and killed 11 members of its diplomatic and media corps. Alarm bells rang in Tehran, but threats of military action and a ceremonial deployment of troops along the border with Afghanistan was all that ensued in response. Later, it was discovered that the murders had been carried out by [Sipah-e-Sahaba](#), a rabidly anti-Shiite militant organization with close connections to the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment. Pakistan's nuclear status must have been in the minds of Iranian leaders and strategists, who stopped short of

military intervention against the Islamabad-backed militants in Afghanistan. No wonder Iran rushed to help the U.S.-led coalition overthrow the Taliban government three years later.

Over the past decade, narcotic trafficking, banditry, kidnapping and cross-border attacks have been rampant in the Baluchistan region straddling Iran and Pakistan. Yet, the militant threat reached a **turning point** in October 2009 when a suicide operation by the “Jundullah” separatist group in the Iranian border town of Pishin **claimed** the lives of over 30 people, including two senior Revolutionary Guard commanders. Though the group’s leader Abdolmalek Rigi was later apprehended and executed in Tehran, bilateral tensions as a consequence of Sunni militant activity have recently escalated into deadly border skirmishes engaging conventional military forces of both sides. In mid-October this year, Islamabad filed a diplomatic protest with Tehran after attempts by Iranian security forces to chase militants across the border led to the **death** of a Pakistani Frontier Corps paramilitary and left four other soldiers wounded. Shortly afterwards and in an unprecedented escalation, the two sides **exchanged** mortar fire.

As a matter of fact, Iran does not have many friends in the region (hence Tehran’s obsessive defense of Bashar al-Assad in Syria), while its unique foreign policy vision in general and nuclear ambitions in particular have alienated and in some cases antagonized world powers. Nor does the Islamic Republic enjoy the protective cover of a powerful nuclear-weapons state (NWS) as in the case, say, of South Korea and Japan, both of which fall under the “nuclear umbrella” of the United States. If the Iranian leadership has drawn one single historical lesson from the **bitter-ended** Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), it is the realist maxim of “self-help”: they will have to fight single-handedly should any serious conflict or conflagration break out within their borders or beyond. This applies today as much as it did in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution.

Iran’s concerns about Pakistan’s atomic capability are mainly two-fold. As the “**fastest-growing**” arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world, Pakistani nukes — or more likely, sensitive nuclear technology — run the risk of falling into the wrong hands, given the embedded presence of Sunni militant groups throughout the land as well as the close ties between these groups and certain segments of the military-security establishment that generally oversees Islamabad’s nuclear activities. After all, Pakistan has a long track record in employing the export of militancy as an instrument of foreign policy making. As the foremost Shiite power in the Middle East, Iran sees itself as the immediate target in the eventuality of such scenarios due to its ideology but also its geographical proximity.

These fears have been intensified by the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (IS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) and the transnational links it is trying to foster with the **Pakistani Taliban** and Sunni jihadists in South Asia among others. Over a year into its inception, it is no secret today that IS is frantically **scrambling** to get its hands on weapons of mass destruction including chemical and biological agents, which the terror group has reportedly used against Kurdish fighters in the Syrian border town of **Kobani** and Iraqi forces in the **Salahuddin** province. IS and its like-minded Sunni sympathizers regard Shiites — particularly Iranians — as “Safawi” and “Rafida,” pejorative terms referring to those Muslims who are perceived to have deviated from the true path of Islam and dismissed the authentic Islamic tradition, hence more legitimate targets for “believers” than the Western “infidels.”

Tehran also has serious apprehensions about Pakistan's strategic alliance with its archrival and Sunni powerhouse Saudi Arabia, which is largely driven by a common sectarian ideology. Riyadh has invested heavily in the Pakistani nuclear program and **is believed** to be able to obtain atomic weapons from Islamabad at will. In the words of a senior Pakistani official aware of the unwritten **covenant** between the two capitals, "What did we think the Saudis were giving us all that money for? It wasn't charity." Amos Yaldin, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, has similarly observed that if Iranians manage to acquire nukes, "The Saudis will not wait one month. They already paid for the bomb, they will go to Pakistan and bring what they need to bring." Yet Tehran's worry is that, in certain circumstances, Riyadh may take such an action even without the materialization of an Iranian bomb.

What are the implications of all this for the ongoing nuclear negotiations? Arguably, this complex dynamic can act as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it may dispose the Iranian leadership to stand their ground firmly and leave ample space for deterrent action in the face of mounting threats in the neighborhood. Such a "tragic" view, needless to say, bodes poorly for the prospects of a comprehensive deal. On the other hand, it may persuade Tehran to lose no time facilitating an ultimate agreement over its nuclear venture, so it can integrate fully into the fold of international community and thus enjoy the normative checks and balances that keep states from transgressing each other's national sovereignty and security.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that should talks fail, the Pakistan factor will play a more prominent role than ever before in Iran's nuclear calculus.

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